# VITAL HABITATS GOAL

## Forest Buffers Outcome

2025 PROGRESS
**OFF COURSE**

**OUTCOME:** Continually increase the capacity of forest buffers to provide water quality and habitat benefits throughout the watershed. Restore 900 miles per year of riparian forest buffer and conserve existing buffers until at least 70 percent of riparian areas throughout the watershed are forested.

**PROGRESS AS OF 2021:** The Forest Buffers Outcome is off course. The Chesapeake Bay Program has not met its goal for riparian forest buffers since 2002, often achieving less than 10% of the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement* goal. The most recently available data shows that between 2017 and 2018, about 158 miles of forest buffers were planted along rivers and streams in the watershed, followed by about 83 miles in 2019. While this marks progress toward the outcome, it is 742 and 817 miles below the 900-mile-per-year target, respectively. While the Forestry Workgroup has not been able to show an increase in progress, they have been able to focus on programs that can accelerate implementation. Over the years, the Forestry Workgroup has identified many barriers to achieving this outcome. One message they would like to emphasize is that they have limited domain over the agricultural community and state water quality regulators. This outcome would benefit from higher-level (non-forestry) involvement for each watershed jurisdiction, as the workgroup lacks the leadership to push this largely agricultural practice.

**BACKGROUND:** Forest buffers have played a role in Chesapeake Bay restoration since 1994 when the Chesapeake Executive Council asked the Chesapeake Bay Program to develop a policy to "enhance riparian stewardship and efforts to conserve and restore riparian forest buffers". In the 2007 Forest Conservation Directive, the watershed jurisdictions agreed to restore 900 miles of forest buffers per year cumulatively. The outcome was formally included into the *Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*, and an additional target of at least 70% forest coverage was developed. Seventy percent is seen as a low threshold for a healthy Bay watershed.

**BASELINE:** In 2010, 358.9 miles of forest buffers were planted in the watershed, but the 900-miles-per-year goal was first established in 2007. In the 2000s, each watershed jurisdiction established Tributary Strategies to reduce pollution from nutrients and sediment. These strategies had a forest buffer target higher than the 900 miles-per-year, which is why it was not scaled back when the *Watershed Agreement* was put into place.

**DATA SOURCE:** Acres of forest buffers are provided to the Chesapeake Bay Program by the watershed jurisdictions on an annual basis to be added to the Watershed Model. Some of the partners reporting progress include the Maryland Forest Service, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, Virginia Department of Forestry and Department of Conservation Resources, West Virginia Division of Forestry, Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control and the Upper Susquehanna Coalition for New York.